

CHARLES DE LINT

**THE
PAINTED
BOY**



VIKING

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The Painted Boy

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THE DRAGON GARDEN, CHICAGO CHINATOWN, 2003

Jade that is not chiseled cannot become a gem.

—CHINESE PROVERB

THE BOY HAD finally fallen asleep. Standing at the side of his bed, Susan Li pulled the cover down and studied the dragon tattoo that was not a tattoo. It took up most of her eleven-year-old son's back, a complicated pattern of golds and yellows with black outlines, the image bearing a disturbing similarity to the logo of the restaurant downstairs.

He'd always been a brave boy, never flinching over cuts and scrapes, but he'd cried in misery for hours at the pain of the image forming on his skin.

The family crest.

The family curse was what Susan called it.

She had three other children. She'd agonized over each of them until they reached puberty, then given thanks to the spirits of her ancestors that the child had been spared. Three times lucky.

But not this time.

"<Is he sleeping?>" a voice said in Mandarin.

She turned to see her own mother standing in the doorway.

"You don't have some magic to tell you that?" she asked.

Paupau frowned at the double insult—the tone of her daughter's voice and being addressed in the adopted language rather than Mandarin—but then her features smoothed.

"<I was only making conversation, daughter,>" she said.

Susan nodded. She wanted to rail at the older woman, but she knew it wasn't Paupau's fault. There was something that lay deep in the family's blood. It went back for generations.

"I thought my children would be free of the curse," she said. "That it would skip my children's generation as it did my own."

"<It's not a curse—you know that, daughter. It's a responsibility. And a great honor.>"

"<I could do without such honors,>" Susan said, finally switching to Mandarin.

It was impossible to read Paupau's expression.

"<I know,>" she told her daughter. "<But the duty lies in our blood. We can no more deny it than we can pluck the moon from the sky and wear it as a brooch.>"

"<What do I tell him when he wakes?>" Susan said. "<How do I explain this to him?>"

Paupau's gaze went to the sleeping boy.

"<That will be my burden,>" she finally said.

SANTO DEL VADO VIEJO , MARCH 2008

Fortune seldom repeats; troubles never occur alone.

—CHINESE PROVERB

ROSALIE BROUGHT a plate of beans and rice out to La Maravilla's back patio. Setting the plate on a table, she got a glass of water from a pitcher by the door, then settled gratefully into a chair. She'd been on her feet since early this morning and she'd be here until late tonight, working a double shift because her cousin Ines had asked her to cover for her.

For a long moment she simply savored being able to relax in the quiet. She took the elastic out of her hair and redid her ponytail. She pulled the chair on the opposite side of the table closer with the toe of her running shoe, then stretched her legs out on it.

It was midafternoon of another hot day and she had the patio to herself. The *touristas* preferred the air-conditioning inside, and in comparison the two-tiered patio was not only hot, but also shabby. It sported a motley array of plastic patio furniture, worn by use and discolored by weather. A fence of saguaro ribs ran along either side of the patio to the wall at the back; scraggly cacti grew in rock garden beds that followed the fences. More saguaro ribs served as a half roof over this part of the patio. Two large mesquite trees shaded the upper tier and were home to dozens of wrens and sparrows that would swoop down to snatch dropped tortilla chips. A low adobe wall separated the patio from the dusty alley behind.

The birds were bold, the tiny lizards shy. But if you sat quietly enough, they would come out from between the saguaro ribs or rest on the wide top of the wall soaking up the sun.

Rosalie moved her plate closer and reached for her fork, but before she could take a bite, she heard the sound of rapid footsteps in the alley. A moment later, a dark-haired Chinese boy wearing a small backpack vaulted over the wall. He saw her, put a finger to his lips, then scrambled up into one of the mesquites with all the agility of a monkey.

While she was still registering his sudden appearance, she heard more footsteps. A moment later two of the local gangbangers were staring at her from the other side of the wall. She didn't know their names, but she knew they ran with the Presidio Kings. The heavier of the two pointed at her with a muscled arm covered in tattoos. He had a crown tattooed on his forehead with devil's horns on either side. His companion had a knife scar down one side of his face.

"Yo," he said. "You there. You see a Chink go by?"

Rosalie had no reason to protect the boy hiding in the tree, but like most people in the neighborhood, she hated the swaggering gangbangers.

She shook her head.

~~“I find you’ve been lying to me,” the man said, “and I’ll come back and mess up that pretty little face of yours.”~~

The threat made her angry, but she kept her temper in check. Confronting him would only make things worse.

She lowered her feet to the ground to make it easier to move if she had to retreat into the restaurant.

“I’m not lying,” she said. “No one went by.”

And it was the truth. The boy hadn’t gone by. He’d climbed up into the tree.

The gangbanger held her gaze for a long moment, then he grinned. He blew her a kiss and the pair moved off down the alley. Rosalie raised her middle finger to their backs, but she stayed where she was until her pulse slowed a little. She waited a few moments longer before she went up the steps and crossed the upper patio to lean over the wall. She looked in the direction the men had gone, then the other just to be safe, before she quietly called up into the tree.

“They’re gone,” she said. “You can come down now.”

He was just as agile in his descent, but whereas before she didn’t doubt it was panic that had gotten him up the tree so quickly, now she was sure he was just showing off. He dropped the last few feet landing lightly, and they stood there looking at each other.

He wasn’t hard to look at, Rosalie thought. He seemed about seventeen—her own age—with the soft jet-black hair that you couldn’t get out of a bottle, only from your genes. His eyes were so dark they almost seemed black, and he was sinewy rather than scrawny, as she’d thought from her earlier glance. His well-worn jeans were a boot cut, though he was wearing running shoes. His white T-shirt had no logo and could stand a wash. He had a gray hooded jersey tied around his waist.

“Thanks,” he said.

She nodded.

“So, what did you do to piss off the Kings?” she asked.

“The Kings?” he repeated. “What, are those guys in a band or something?”

“Try gang. They were members of the Presidio Kings and seriously, you don’t want to mess with them.”

He held up a hand to stop her.

“I swear I have no idea what they wanted from me,” he said.

“Then why were they chasing you?”

“I don’t know. I got into town on the ten o’clock bus. When I got off the bus I noticed these guys—you know, the baggy pants, shaved heads, all the tattoos on their faces and everything.”

She gave him a surprised look. “You saw the Kings at the bus station? That’s weird.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s 66 Bandas turf.”

“I didn’t mean it was the same guys who were chasing me,” he said. “They were just, you know, similar.” He gave her a puzzled look. “Is it all gangs around here?”

She shrugged. “There’s, like, two worlds,” she said, interlacing her fingers and holding them up. “The world most people see and then the one that belongs to the *bandas*—the gangs. They don’t really mix—lots of people don’t know much more about the *bandas* than what they read in the paper—but if you pay any kind of attention, you can see them both. Here in the barrios, we don’t really get a choice. They’re always around and all you can do is try to keep out of their way.”

“I wish I’d talked to you before I got off the bus.”

“So, what did you do to get onto the 66ers’ radar?”

“Nothing.” He paused, then added, “Well, I talked to a cop.”

She rolled her eyes. “Nice move.”

“What? I was just asking him directions to some Chinese restaurants.”

“You don’t like Mexican food?”

“I love Mexican food. I was looking for a job. I went to this one a couple of blocks south of the bus station called the something Gardens—”

“Shanghai.”

“Right. The Shanghai Gardens. The cook there said he’d heard the Imperial down here in Barrrio Histórico was looking for help. When I stepped out of the restaurant, those guys were waiting for me and told me to hand over my knapsack. I got away from them and—”

“You got away from *two* different gangs?”

He shrugged. “As soon as I saw them, I recognized them from the bus depot, so I just took off. I’m a fast runner. But here’s the funny thing. When I was crossing that bridge over the San Pedro . . .” His voice trailed off and he gave her a puzzled smile. “Why exactly do you have a huge dry riverbed in the middle of the city?”

“It’s only dry until it rains in the mountains. Then it’s a torrent that’s so strong it can easily wash a car away. Some years it even overflows its banks.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “So, you were crossing the bridge . . . ?”

“Yeah, and those guys were hot behind me, but when I got halfway across, they just stopped and stood there watching me run to the other side.”

“That’s because this side of the river is Kings’ turf.”

“The point is I’ve got no idea why those first guys were after me. And then, as soon as I started walking away from the bridge, I picked up the two you just saw and took off through the alleys to try to lose them.”

“They must have seen the 66ers chasing you and wanted to know why.”

“I wouldn’t mind knowing why.”

“Maybe they think you’re a drug courier.”

“A *what?*”

“You know. You’re going into a Chinese restaurant, which could be a front for the Triads.”

He shook his head. “Right, and we make our meat dishes with cats and dogs that we catch in the alleys.”

She pulled a face. “I didn’t mean it that way. But you hear people talking about it at school—how Asian gangs are supposed to be trying to muscle in on the *bandas’* turf.”

“Asian street gangs are a far cry from the Triads. That’s like comparing cockroaches to wolves.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Well,” he said, “I’m not Triad and all I’m carrying is a change of clothes. No drugs. No secret agendas.”

“I believe you.”

Rosalie leaned over the wall again to check that the alley was still clear.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Sure, but—”

“C’mon. I was just having a late lunch. You can join me if you like.”

She headed back to the lower part of the patio and he trailed along behind her.

“I’m Rosalie,” she said as she indicated he take one of the chairs at the table where she’d been

sitting. "What's your name?"

"Jay Li."

"Like Bruce Lee," she said, and faked a few kung fu moves.

He smiled. "No. My name's spelled L-I. And I don't really know those kinds of martial arts."

"Me neither."

"I can tell."

"Be nice, or you don't get any lunch. Rice and beans okay?"

"Anything'd be great."

She went into the kitchen and quickly made him a fat burrito. She put it on a plate with some tortilla chips and a little container of salsa.

"<Somebody's hungry.>"

She looked up to see her uncle leaning against the door that led to the restaurant. He had sideburns, his dark hair slicked back in a look that had been popular back in the fifties. Peeking out from under the rolled-up sleeves of his white shirt were faded *bandas* tattoos.

"<It's for a friend,>" she said, speaking Spanish as he had.

Her uncle looked past her to where he could see Jay through the window.

"<Does Ramon know you have this friend?>" he asked, smiling.

"<He's a *friend* friend. And I didn't even know he might be one until I met him a few moments ago.>"

Her uncle shook his head.

"<Still taking in strays,>" he said. "<You need to be careful, Rosalita. Not everyone is as good a person as you are.>"

She ducked her head in embarrassment.

"<I have a good feeling about him,>" she said. "<And a couple of the Kings were chasing him, but that makes him okay in my book.>"

Her uncle's features darkened. "<Those bastards—>" "<It's okay,>" she said. "<They didn't cause any trouble. They were just being assholes, yelling at me from the alley before they took off.>"

"<Where was your new friend?>"

"<Hiding up in a mesquite he'd climbed. I swear he's part monkey, he got up there so fast.>"

Her uncle laughed, but then his features grew serious again.

"<What do they want with him, Rosalita?>" he asked.

"<I don't know. He—his name's Jay. He doesn't know, either.>"

Her uncle looked out the window again, then shrugged.

"<Just be careful,>" he said.

"<I will, Tío.>"

He shook his head as he walked back into the main part of the restaurant. "<You and your strays .>"

It was true, Rosalie thought. She couldn't resist them.

From the foundling cats and dogs that lived in and around her trailer at the back of her uncle's yard to the kids at school whom the other kids picked on.

But someone had to take care of those who couldn't take care of themselves.

Not that Jay didn't look capable of looking after himself, she thought as she brought the plate out to him. But everyone could use a kind word or a helping hand sometimes.

"Wow," he said as she set it in front of him. "This is a feast."

"You haven't eaten for awhile?"

“Just truck-stop food when the bus stopped.”

She poured him a glass of water and slid it across the table.

“So, why do you want a job in a Chinese restaurant?” she asked.

He started to answer, but his mouth was too full.

“I grew up working in one,” he said when he’d swallowed, “and it’s pretty much the only thing I’m good at. Besides—apparently—getting into trouble.”

She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment.

“Have you ever tried working in another kind of restaurant?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I’ve only ever worked in my parents’ place, but I know the business from the ground up. I’ve been a dishwasher, busboy, waiter, and cook. I know how to clean up, order supplies, make the food, and work the cash.” He took another, smaller bite from the burrito. “I need to get a job. And find out where the Y is so I’ve got a place to sleep tonight.”

Rosalie nodded. “So are you on March break, or have you already finished school?”

“You mean like an accelerated program?”

“I guess.”

He smiled. “Just because I’m Asian doesn’t mean I’m an academic whiz. Maybe it’s in my genes because I’ve got a brother who’s a doctor, and a sister who’s a lawyer, and another sister who’s the CEO of an NGO helping kids in Africa. But it never took with me. I’m a dropout.”

“Were your parents disappointed?”

“You’d think. But Paupau told them—”

He broke off at her puzzled look. “Sorry. That’s my grandmother on my mother’s side. She’s kind of like Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*. Everybody in the family—heck, everybody in the neighborhood—defers to her. Anyway, she told my parents that this was something I was supposed to do, so I left with their blessing.”

“I don’t get it. What are you supposed to do?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? She just told me to go someplace that feels right and then I’d figure it out.”

“And your parents were really okay with your doing this?”

“Not really. I don’t even know that I am. But you don’t argue with Paupau. She has a lot of strange ideas, but like I said, everybody pretty much does what she says. So I stuck my finger on a map and came up Santo del Vado Viejo—which I’ve got to tell you, I’d never heard of before—and here I am. He smiled. “And who knows, maybe those guys chasing me and me hiding out in your tree is all part of some bigger plan.”

“You don’t believe that,” she said.

“Paupau says there are no coincidences, there is only the fate that you must follow.”

“But you’re—” She hesitated, then plunged on. “You’re just a kid like me. You should be going to school, hanging with your friends, enjoying your March break . . .”

“Which would beat being chased by a bunch of tattooed guys who want to kick my head in. I can’t argue with that. So what about you? What’s your story?”

He took another bite from his burrito and gave her an expectant look.

“There’s nothing much to tell,” she said. “I go to school. I work here in my uncle’s restaurant. I hang out with my friends.”

“And stay out of trouble.”

“Usually, yes.” She studied him for a moment before adding, “You know, my uncle’s looking for a cook. Maybe he’ll give you the job if I ask him.”

“I don’t know anything about preparing Mexican food.”

“You can learn. It’s not hard.”

“I don’t want to impose.”

“It’s cool,” she said. “Really. Unless you really *have* to work in a Chinese restaurant.”

“It’s not that. It’s just . . . I’ve got this letter of recommendation that Paupau said I should show a prospective employer. I don’t know what it says, but I guess that’s why the guy at the Shanghai Gardens was so helpful.”

“You don’t know what it says?”

He shook his head. “It’s in Chinese. I know, I know. But I was born in Chicago, not in Hong Kong or the main-land. I can speak Mandarin, but I can’t read it. Everyone in my family speaks Cantonese except for Paupau and my mother. Anyway, the point is your uncle wouldn’t be able to read it, either.”

“Tío Sandro makes his own decisions about who he thinks’ll fit in here.” She smiled. “And since I’m putting in a good word for you, I know the job’s yours if you want it.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“And until you can get a place of your own, you can sleep on my couch.”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Are you this nice to all strangers?” he asked.

“I just like helping people.”

“And I totally appreciate it.”

“Oh, and before you get any ideas,” she said, “I’ve got a boyfriend.”

“’S cool. I’ve got a girlfriend.”

There was a laugh in his dark eyes that made her ask, “What’s her name?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t met her yet.”

“Has that line ever worked for you?” she asked.

“What? You don’t believe in romance and true love? That somewhere out there is the one person who’s going to make you complete?”

“Is this more of your grandmother’s wisdom?”

“Nope, this is all my own.”

She shook her head. “Life’s not a pop song, it’s a rap song. And around here, it’s a *narcocorrido*.”

“Say what?”

“Do you know what *corridos* are?”

“Some kind of Mexican music?”

She nodded. “They’re part of the *norteño* tradition and usually have a polka beat. In the old days they would tell the stories of the Mexican ‘Robin Hood’ bandits like Malverde—‘the generous bandit who stole from the rich and then shared his loot with the poor. There’s even a song about how at the end of his life, he got one of his own friends to turn him in so that his people would benefit from the reward money.’”

“Cool.”

“If it’s true.”

“But now . . . ?” Jay said.

“Now bands sing *narcocorridos* praising the murderers and drug lords who rule the *bandas*. It’s weird, but in Spanish the word for band and gang are the same, and now these stupid kids are showing us why.”

“But it’s just like rap, isn’t it? Most of the people who make it and listen to it aren’t actually drug lords going around shooting people.”

“No, here it’s the *bandas* that get shot. A group’ll sing a song in praise of one of the drug lords and members of a rival gang will shoot them for it.”

“And is everyone like that around here?”

“No, of course not. But it still cuts close to home. My friend Anna’s brother was killed in a drive-by a couple of years ago. My cousin José is in prison. The *bandas* are everywhere. Even my uncle ran with a gang when he was a kid, but he got out of *la vida loca* before he hurt himself or anyone else.”

“Lucky.”

Rosalie shook her head. “No, smart. And brave. It’s hard to turn your back on your friends the way he had to. Because they’re like your family. So he understands why José was running with the Kings but it still breaks his heart that his only son’s in jail.”

Jay glanced where the gangbangers had been earlier.

“Maybe I picked the wrong place to move,” he said.

“Oh, no. I’m making it sound horrible. There are lots of good people here, too. And there’s lots of other kinds of music, and all kinds of arts and street fairs and festivals. We have the mountains and the desert. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.”

He smiled. “Well, I’m here now, so I might as well get a taste of it.”

“Do you want me to talk to my uncle? I’m working another shift tonight. You could help out and when it’s slow I’ll show you the ropes.”

He plucked at his T-shirt. “I’m kind of grubby.”

“Oh, right. You should have a shower and clean up first. I’ll see if Anna’s free to run you over to my place.”

“Is this the Anna whose brother was killed?”

She nodded.

“I don’t want to impose on her, either.”

“Are you kidding? She’s out of school, too, and is probably dying to do something. If you leave her alone, all she does is sit in her room and play her guitar.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know her and she doesn’t know me . . .”

“Don’t worry about it. All you need to know is that she’s one of my best friends and plays in a band with my boyfriend, Ramon. You’ll like her—she’s cute.”

“Great. I’ll make such a good first impression on her all grubby like this.”

“You made a good first impression on me.”

He studied her for a moment with that solemn, dark-eyed gaze of his. Then he shrugged.

“And I have no idea how or why,” he said.

“Maybe I just like the way you climb into a tree.”

“Right.”

She smiled. “Finish your burrito. I’m going to talk to Tío and then call Anna to come pick you up.”

“Do you always get your own way?” he asked as she got up from the table.

Rosalie smiled. “Only when I’m right,” she said.

Then she disappeared into the restaurant.

Jay finished his burrito, washing it down with half a glass of water. He hadn’t thought the salsa was too hot while he was eating, but the spices had crept up on him. Setting the glass down, he got up and walked to the back wall of the patio. When he was satisfied that the gangbangers weren’t still lurking

around, he returned to the table to enjoy the quiet and warmth of the patio while he waited for Rosalie to return.

She reminded him of his sisters—not pushy, just very sure of herself—and it made him feel a little more at home in a place that was so different from where he'd grown up. When he caught the bus two days ago in Chicago, there'd still been snow on the ground. There'd been a *lot* of snow because they'd been having a brutal winter. But as the bus took him south, the snow had slowly disappeared, the temperatures rose, and then he was here, in this strange city in the middle of a landscape that seemed to be made up of nothing more than rocks and dirt.

He remembered Paupau nodding sagely when he told her where he was going, as though it was what she'd expected. As though she was familiar with his destination and it was exactly the place he was supposed to go. But now that he was here, he wasn't so sure. It seemed so much more intimidating than it had in the guidebook he'd been reading on the bus trip south.

Rosalie was right. He *was* just a kid still. He should be enjoying the March break and anticipating his return to classes. Except he didn't care much for school—or at least it didn't care much for him. Teachers, his fellow students—they all sensed the secret he carried but couldn't share. He doubted they would put it in so many words, but they knew there was something different about him and kept him at arm's length.

Maybe it was for the best that he had chosen a place so far away. The city and surrounding desert felt completely alien to him, but maybe alien was good. For one thing, he couldn't remember the last time he'd met someone his own age who didn't immediately tense up around him.

He noticed a tiny lizard making its way up the wall of saguaro ribs. It appeared to notice him at the same time because it froze in place—the lizard version of invisibility.

“What do you think, little brother?” he asked it. “Is Paupau a wise teacher, or just a crazy old lady?”

“Who are you talking to?”

Rosalie had returned. She stood in the doorway with a tall, well-muscled man standing behind her. His black hair was slicked back from his forehead and his skin was dark against his white shirt. Faded tattoos patterned his forearms. His face was impassive.

Jay started to point at the lizard, but it had taken his momentary distraction to vanish back between the saguaro ribs.

“Myself, apparently,” he said.

Rosalie's eyebrows lifted.

“My niece tells me you're looking for a job,” the man said.

Jay stood up and came around the table.

“Yes, sir,” he said. “I've got plenty of restaurant experience—just none of it with Mexican food.”

“That can be learned. Do you take drugs?”

“No, sir.”

“Are you a member of any gang?”

“No, sir.”

The man studied him intently as he fired his questions. Then he asked the kicker:

“Do you have honorable intentions toward my niece?”

“Tío!” Rosalie protested.

Jay regarded him with surprise. He glanced at Rosalie before he answered.

“She's way out of my class, sir,” he said. “And besides, I hear she already has a boyfriend.”

Rosalie's uncle finally smiled.

“Good answer,” he said. He offered his hand. “I'm Sandro Hernandez.”

“But everybody just calls him Tío,” Rosalie put in.

“I’m James Li,” Jay said as he shook his new employer’s hand, “and everybody calls me Jay. Thanks for this opportunity.”

“You’ve got work papers?” Tío asked.

“I was born here. I’ve got my Social Security card.”

“Great. We’ll get the paperwork sorted out later. Rosalie says you can start training tonight?”

“As soon as I get cleaned up.”

“I’ve already called Anna,” Rosalie said. “She’s on her way.”

Rosalie had to get back to work, so she left Jay to wait for Anna in the dusty alley. He didn’t have time to really start to worry about the gangbangers before a vintage turquoise-and-white Valiant pulled up. The driver rolled down her window and smiled.

“Well, look at you,” she said. “All inscrutable and handsome.”

Jay had to laugh. Rosalie was right. Anna was cute. Full-lipped and dark-eyed, black hair streaked with red, big jangly earrings. Her dark skin stood out against a cream T-shirt giving a shout-out to some Mexican band he’d never heard of. If Rosalie was a classic beauty, Anna was the wild girl you see sitting in the back of class, tapping her foot to some rhythm only she could hear. He could tell she was the girl who didn’t wait to be asked to join anything—she made her own plans and did the asking.

“Cool car,” he told her.

“I know—isn’t it? My brother got it fixed up for me for my sixteenth birthday. He did most of the work on it himself.”

“Nice to have that kind of talent.”

Something changed in her face.

“Be nicer if he’d stuck to it instead of jacking cars for the Kings. Maybe the asshole’d still be alive.”

There was a moment of awkward silence, then Jay nodded. “Rosalie said something about . . . um . . .”

Anna sighed. “Sorry. I’ve got this love/hate thing going with my memories of him.” She gave him a too-bright smile. “So, are you getting in?”

“If you’re sure it’s not too much of a bother.”

“If it was, would I be here? Don’t be shy.”

He went around to the passenger’s side and opened the door.

“You want to drive?” she asked as he slid in.

Jay shook his head. “I don’t even have my license. But I’m excellent at grabbing a subway or bus.”

“Then it looks like I’m driving.”



She was good company, chatting and laughing like they were old friends. The first thing she asked them when they pulled away was what he had on his MP3 player. When he named a few of the bands, she nodded.

her approval and he felt like he'd passed some kind of test. He was glad he had because Rosalie wasn't just right about her being cute. She was also right about him liking her.

What wasn't to like?

Too bad it couldn't go anywhere. He didn't flatter himself that her flirting was anything but just the way she was—friendly and fun. Even if she did become more interested, nothing could happen. Not with the secrets he carried.

“Rosalie says you're in a band,” he said. “What are you called?”

“We're Malo Malo.” She pulled a face. “Yeah, I know. ‘Bad Bad.’ It kind of sucks. But Ramon—”

She glanced at him.

“Rosalie's boyfriend,” he said.

“Yeah. It's Ramon's band—I mean, he started it—so he got to pick the name.”

“What kind of music do you play?”

“We do some rap, some rock, all mixed up with the barrio flava—you know? Well, here we are.”

They were only a few long blocks from the restaurant when Anna turned the Valiant down a dirt alley and pulled up along a chain-link fence. There was a low adobe house facing the street with a low silver trailer at the other end of the yard. Both had blue trim around the doors and windows. Between them was a big expanse of dirt. Mesquite and palo verde trees grew at the back of the yard, shading the trailer, and there was a two-armed saguaro cactus by the house that stood almost thirty feet tall. Dried grasses and clusters of prickly pear followed the line of the fence.

And then there were the dogs. Jay counted eight. They were mongrels of all sizes, from something he thought was a terrier mix to a big, long-legged mastiff. The rest were various combinations of shepherd, lab, and some kind of yellow dog that he couldn't place.

“I could've walked here, easy,” he said, turning back to Anna.

She shook her head. “Not with the Kings looking for you. You wouldn't have gotten half a block. What do they want with you, anyway?”

“Haven't a clue.”

She gave him a look.

“Seriously,” he said. He nodded toward the yard, adding, “What's with all the dogs?”

“Oh, that's our Rosie for you. We call her Our Lady of the Barrio because she's always taking in strays. She finds homes for most of them, but there's always a bunch hanging around.” She smiled. “That goes for people, too. She puts in time at the soup kitchen and homeless shelter and takes care of kinds of loser kids at school under her wing.”

“I hope I'm not too much of a loser.”

Anna gave him a light punch on the shoulder. “I'm kidding. But Rosie's pretty much a freaking saint, no lie. I don't know how she juggles it all and still keeps up her grades. How're you with dogs?” she added as they got out of the car.

“I'm cool.”

Anna opened the gate and the pack came running. Anna stepped forward, like she was going to call them down, but they all stopped within a few yards and sat in the dirt, staring at them. No, Jay realized. Staring at *him*.

“That's weird,” Anna said.

“What is?”

“Well, usually they're all over visitors, yapping and carrying on.”

She gave Jay a puzzled look.

He shrugged. “I'm good with animals. We understand each other.”

She looked back at the dogs, a little frown furrowing her brow.

“Obviously,” she finally said and led the way to the trailer.

Jay paused at the door even though Anna had already gone in. She turned to look at him.

“What’s the holdup?” she asked.

“Nothing. It’s just . . .”

He didn’t know what to say. He felt the presence of some kind of protective barrier keeping him out as effectively as if Anna had closed the door in his face. It took him a moment to realize it was the blue paint on the door and door frame. It seemed to vibrate when he looked at it closely and gave off a spicy scent that attracted him as much as it repelled.

“We have this, um, superstition in my family,” he finally said. “About blue trim on doors.”

Anna raised her eyebrows.

“It’s just,” he went on, “we think it’s bad luck to go in unless someone actually invites us in.”

“You’re shitting me. What are you, a vampire?”

“Walking around in the day?”

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll give you that. But do you know why so many houses in this part of the country have blue on the windowsills and doors?”

He shook his head.

“It’s to keep out the evil spirits.” She waited a moment, then added, “Are you trying to tell me you’re an evil spirit?”

He laughed. “Hardly. And who says the spirits have to be evil?”

“What would be the point of keeping out good spirits?”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“So, are you coming in, or what?”

“Are you inviting me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Come in, come in, already. You’re one weird dude, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.”

But as soon as she spoke the words, he could cross the invisible barrier. He dropped his knapsack by the door and looked around. The trailer wasn’t much on the outside, but inside it felt bigger than he thought it would and it was tidy. The furniture was all mismatched thrift store finds, but Rosalie obviously had a good eye and managed to bring harmony into what might have been chaos.

“And here come the cats,” Anna said.

Jay turned to see a gray tabby and a slinky black cat coming down a short hall. They stopped when they saw him, hissed, and fled to the room at the far end.

“Good with animals?” Anna asked.

“Not so much with cats, I guess.”

“The shower’s through there,” Anna said, pointing to a door down the narrow hall. “She keeps her spare towels on the shelves behind the door. Use whatever you need.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll go play with the dogs. Unless you need me to invite you into the bathroom before you can use the shower.”

He smiled. “No, I’m good.”

He waited until the door closed behind her before he went into the bedroom. Staying in the doorway, he knelt down on the carpet. The two cats were under the bed. A third, a striped orange-and-white tom, glared at him from the windowsill.

“Okay, tiger brothers,” he said. “Can we have a truce here? I promise not to hurt you or Rosalie. I’

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